



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Folsom Field Office
63 Natoma Street
Folsom, CA 95630
www.blm.gov/ca/folsom



Darby Knob Fuel Break (CA-180-08-69) Decision Record October 2008

1.0 Introduction and Background

The Bureau of Land Management's Folsom Field Office (BLM) proposes to build a fuel break on BLM-administered land on Darby Knob. Based on information in the EA, the project record, and recommendations from my staff, the following constitutes my decision.

2.0 Decision

2.1 Alternatives Considered but not Selected

The no action alternative was considered but not selected. Under this alternative, the fuel break would not be built. There would be no impacts on the environment. However, BLM would miss an opportunity to address its fire management goals, objectives, and strategies laid out in the Sierra Resource Management Plan and the Folsom Field Office Fire Management Plan.

2.2 Decision and Rationale

Based on information in the EA, the project record, and recommendations my staff, I have decided to implement the proposed action as described in the EA. There are no restrictions on the time of implementation. BLM will build a fuel break, as proposed in the EA, on BLM-administered land. The fuel break is needed to help protect lives and property.

3.0 Consultation and Coordination

No special status animal or plant species (or their habitats) will be affected by the project; therefore, consultation with US Fish and Wildlife Service was unnecessary.

4.0 Public Involvement

The EA was posted on the BLM Folsom Field Office internet website for a formal 15-day public comment period in August 2008. No comments were received.

5.0 Plan Consistency

Based on information in the EA, the project record, and recommendations from my staff, I conclude that this decision is consistent with the fire management goals, objectives, and strategies laid out in the Sierra Resource Management Plan and the Folsom Field Office Fire Management Plan. The decision is also in compliance with the Endangered Species Act; Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act; and other applicable environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

6.0 Administrative Remedies

Administrative remedies may be available to those who believe they will be adversely affected by this decision. Appeals may be made to the Office of Hearings and Appeals, Office of the Secretary, U.S. Department of Interior, Board of Land Appeals (Board) in strict compliance with the regulations in 43 CFR Part 4. Notices of appeal must be filed in this office within 30 days after publication of this decision. If a notice of appeal does not include a statement of reasons, such statement must be filed with this office and the Board within 30 days after the notice of appeal is filed. The notice of appeal and any statement of reasons, written arguments, or briefs must also be served upon the Regional Solicitor, Pacific Southwest Region, U.S. Department of Interior, 2800 Cottage Way, E-1712, Sacramento, CA 95825.

The effective date of this decision (and the date initiating the appeal period) will be the date the notice of this decision is posted on the BLM Folsom Field Office internet website.



William S. Haigh
Field Manager, Folsom Field Office



Date



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Arrastraville fuel break (CA-180-08-68) Finding of No Significant Impact October 2008

It is my determination that this decision will not result in significant impacts to the quality of the human environment. Anticipated impacts are within the range of impacts addressed in the Sierra Resource Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement. The proposed action does not constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment; therefore, an environmental impact statement is not necessary and will not be prepared. This conclusion is based on my consideration of CEQ's following criteria for significance (40 CFR §1508.27), regarding the context and intensity of the impacts described in the EA, and based on my understanding of the project:

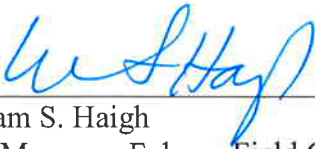
- 1) *Impacts can be both beneficial and adverse and a significant effect may exist regardless of the perceived balance of effects.* Potential impacts include vegetation removal, soil disturbance, and temporary noise and dust due to cutting and masticating fuels. However, none of these impacts would be significant at the local scale or cumulatively because of the small scale of the project. Visual resources may be impacted but are not considered significant.
- 2) *The degree of the impact on public health or safety.* No aspects of the project have been identified as having the potential to significantly and adversely impact public health or safety. In fact, the project is designed to help firefighters fight wildfire; therefore protecting public health and safety.
- 3) *Unique characteristics of the geographic area.* The project area does not have any unique characteristics. Soil, vegetation, wildlife, and cultural resources are all typical.
- 4) *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial effects.* No anticipated effects have been identified that are scientifically controversial. As a factor for determining within the meaning of 40 C.F.R. § 1508.27(b)(4) whether or not to prepare a detailed environmental impact statement, "controversy" is not equated with "the existence of opposition to a use." *Northwest Environmental Defense Center v. Bonneville Power Administration*, 117 F.3d 1520, 1536 (9th Cir. 1997). "The term 'highly controversial' refers to instances in which 'a substantial dispute exists as to the size, nature, or effect of the major federal action rather than the mere existence of opposition to a use.'" *Hells Canyon Preservation Council v. Jacoby*, 9 F.Supp.2d 1216, 1242 (D. Or. 1998).
- 5) *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are likely to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.* The analysis does not show that this action would involve any unique or unknown risks.
- 6) *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.* Fuel break construction and maintenance is not precedent setting.

7) *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.* No significant cumulative impacts have been identified. The project is consistent with the actions and impacts anticipated in the Sierra Resource Management Plan.

8) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect National Historic Register listed or eligible to be listed sites or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historical resources.* The project would not affect cultural resources listed on or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

9) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect ESA listed species or critical habitat.* No ESA listed species (or their habitat) will be affected by the environment.

10) *Whether the action threatens a violation of environmental protection law or requirements.* There is no indication that this decision will result in actions that will threaten such a violation.



William S. Haigh
Field Manager, Folsom Field Office



Date



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EA Number: CA-180-08-68

Proposed Action: Arrastraville Fuel Break

Location: MDM, T 2 N, R 16 E, sections 28 and 33, Tuolumne County, CA (see the project area map attached)

1.0 Purpose of and Need for Action

1.1 Need for Action

The Bureau of Land Management's Folsom Field Office (BLM) manages scattered public lands in the Arrastraville area. Much of this area has not experienced wildfire in decades. Chaparral and other fuels have grown, increasing the possibility of a catastrophic wildfire. At the same time, the local communities have grown. There are now numerous private residences in the area, including adjacent to BLM-administered parcels containing dense fuels. Local residents are concerned about wildfire. The area is considered to be at the wildland-urban interface (WUI) and the local communities are considered "at risk." Some residents are anxious to see public land managers like BLM take action to reduce fuels on public lands in the area. Fuel breaks are needed to help give firefighters places to hold wildfire or launch suppression efforts. The location of the proposed fuel break would serve as a strategic holding point in the event of human- or natural-caused wildfire originating east of the North Fork of the Tuolumne River. The fuel break would connect with two other proposed fuel breaks constructed by the Stanislaus National Forest and the Highway 108 Fire Safe Council.

1.2 Conformance with Applicable Land Use Plans

The proposed action is consistent with the Sierra Resource Management Plan, approved in February 2008, and the Folsom Field Office Fire Management Plan, approved in March 2008. The Sierra Resource Management Plan's Record of Decision (page 15-16) gives BLM the goal of establishing a cost-efficient fire management program commensurate with threats to life, property, public safety, and environmental resources. BLM also has the goal of suppressing wildfire to protect life, property, and environmental resources. BLM's objectives for meeting these goals are use mechanical and other kinds of treatments to reduce the risk of wildfire in WUI communities, reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire through fuels management. The Fire Management Plan gives BLM various non-fire fuels treatment objectives and strategies for specific lands under BLM's administration. Specific objectives and strategies for the fire management unit, in which the project area is located, are laid out on pages 224-225 of the plan.

2.0 Proposed Action and Alternatives

2.1 Proposed Action

The proposed action is to construct and maintain a shaded fuel break along an existing road on BLM-administered land near Arrastraville. The fuel break would be 1.0 mile long and 200 ft wide (100 ft from the centerline of the existing road). The treated area would be approximately 24 acres. BLM

would hire a contractor to build and maintain the fuel break. Fuels would be treated using a large-scale mechanical masticator. A crew would cut fuels within the 200 ft wide area including brush and small trees (up to 6 inches in diameter). They would feed it into the masticator which would chew and chip it. All masticated and cut fuels would be dispersed throughout the project area. This layer of mulch would be less than 8 inches deep and would help to control erosion. All trees greater than 6 inches in diameter would be limbed up to a height of 8 ft or half the height of the tree, whichever is less. Tree spacing would be greater than 20 ft, with just the dominant trees remaining. Portions of the fuel break inaccessible to the masticator may be built by hand using chainsaws and other hand tools. Fencing, berms, cables, and large boulders may be used to prevent motorized vehicles from using the fuel break as a road. The fuel break would be maintained using the same methods described above every 5 to 7 years.

2.2 Project Design Features

To minimize the potential for introduction or spread of invasive weeds, equipment used for the proposed action would be cleaned prior to entering area and would avoid operating within weed-infested areas, such as stands of scotch broom. Hand crews would cut brush in the vicinity of any broom stands, if such stands are encountered. Cut broom stems would not be moved outside of the broom stand, to avoid spreading any broom seed remaining attached to the stems. Broom stems may be piled, but not chipped or masticated.

Equipment use would not occur when soils are too wet to support equipment without soil deformation and soil compaction occurring. The readiness of the soil to support equipment will be judged by the BLM official overseeing the project, (e.g., project inspector). As a rule, if ruts in excess of 2 inches are created by equipment travel, soil conditions are too wet for operations to continue. Equipment operations would be discontinued until soils dry.

2.3 No Action

Under the no action alternative, BLM would not build and maintain a fuel break in the project area.

2.4 Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis

BLM did not consider any other alternatives in detailed analysis.

3.0 Affected Environment

The project area is located along an existing road on scattered BLM parcels in the central Sierra Nevada foothills. Elevations within the project area range from nearly 3900 ft to 3660 ft above sea level. The project area and adjacent areas are dominated by a mixed ponderosa pine-black oak forest. Understory species include mountain misery, poison oak, and manzanita. There are dense stands of manzanita in portions of the project area. Montane Hardwood-Conifer provides habitat for a variety of wildlife species. Mature forests are valuable to cavity nesting birds. Moreover, acorns and manzanita berries are an important food source for many birds as well as mammals. Canopy cover and understory vegetation are variable which makes the habitat suitable for numerous species. The project area is near the boundary of the Stanislaus National Forest. There are numerous private residences in the general area. Recreational use of the project area is low. The existing road within the project area is used by walkers, joggers, bicyclists, off-highway vehicle riders. There is some camping in the area, just off the road within the project area. BLM manages this area in accordance with class III visual resource management (VRM) standards. BLM's objective for class III is to partially retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be moderate. Management activities may attract attention but should not dominate the view of the casual observer. Changes should repeat basic elements found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape. The fuel break may look similar to a ponderosa pine forest that has experienced a natural fire regime,

with a more open park-like appearance than the existing stands. The understories of the existing stands often support a densecover of shrubs and small trees that would be thinned with more frequent fire.

4.0 Environmental Effects

The following critical elements have been considered in this environmental assessment, and unless specifically mentioned later in this EA, have been determined to be unaffected by the proposal: areas of critical environmental concern, prime/unique farmlands, floodplains, wetlands and riparian zones, wild and scenic rivers, wilderness, and environmental justice.

4.1 Impacts of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

The proposed action would not impact atmospheric, water, or soil resources. There are small seasonal streams in the area. The project area is not located on a major stream. The area that would be treated is relatively small in size. Use of a large-scale masticator is expected to cause little soil disturbance. The masticator would be staged on the existing road. Masticated brush and other fuels would be dispersed throughout the project area. This layer of mulch would help prevent erosion. Vehicle barriers such as cables, berms, and large boulders may be placed at strategic locations to prevent dirt bikes and other off-highway vehicles from driving within the treated area and causing erosion problems. Cutting and mastication of fuels, as proposed, would create some dust, but not enough to affect air quality.

The BLM botanist conducted a botanical study of the project area. He conducted a field inventory in May 2008 when conditions were near optimal for plant identification within the project area. The study was designed to help BLM meet its obligations under the Endangered Species Act. He did not find any special status plants affected by the proposed action. The botanist recommended that the proposed action would not affect threatened and endangered plants or other BLM special status plants. Manzanita and other fuels that would be treated are commonplace and would grow back within a few years (refer to the study attached).

Maintenance involving repeated clearing at a short time interval (e.g., five years) has the potential to shift the species composition of the shrub and tree layers in the fuel break. In the shrub layer sprouting species would be favored over those species that reproduce from seed, (e.g., white leaf manzanita). Among the species that reproduce from seed, those that begin reproduction at a younger age would be favored over those that begin reproduction later. In the tree layer, early successional species, (e.g., ponderosa pine), would be favored, because after the fuel break was established, no further trees would be allowed to reach maturity. No seedling trees would reach 6" diameter in 5-7 years, so each new crop of tree seedlings would be cut during the next episode of fuel break maintenance. If late successional species, (e.g., white fir), were not already established, they would never become established. Succession would be effectively arrested. Because of the overall reduction in the number of trees and shrubs at the site, water competition would be reduced, leading to faster growth rates for trees that do remain.

Because of effects to the overstory tree and shrub layers, conditions at the level of the herb layer would change. More sunlight would reach the herb layer with the elimination of shrubs and the thinning of trees. The use of equipment for clearing would provide disturbance and create some bare ground. On the other hand mastication and chipping would create litter that would cover areas and prevent sunlight from reaching the soil surface. Many seeds have light dependent germination and species with such seeds would be less likely to germinate with increased litter.

Construction of the fuel break does alter ecosystem processes. However natural ecosystem processes have already been short-circuited by fire suppression, and in some ways fuel break construction simulates some missing fire effects (e.g., periodic reduction of small understory vegetation). Because

of the linear design of the fuel break, habitat fragmentation would only be an issue if a species was completely excluded by fuel break conditions, and it had no way to travel the 200' to cross over the fuel break. Clearly most pollen transport mechanisms can move pollen more than 200'. Some seed may not readily travel 200', but almost all seed would travel that far on occasion. Mature trees and shrubs are more likely than herbs to be completely excluded from the fuel break. Tree seed is often produced at great height and adapted for wind transport. Shrub seed is sometimes contained in a fleshy fruit adapting it for animal transport. And many shrubs species can reach sexual maturity between maintenance intervals. Fragmentation of some plant species populations could occur theoretically, but it seems a remote possibility.

Because none of the plant species in the fuelbreak are rare, and the effects of fuelbreak construction and maintenance on the immediate vicinity of the fuelbreak can be seen as a minor in relation to the overall ecosystem, vegetation effects are acceptable. (Widespread ecosystem effects are treated under cumulative impacts below.)

The BLM wildlife biologist analyzed the impacts of the project on wildlife, especially on special status wildlife. Her analysis was designed to help BLM meet its obligations under the Endangered Species Act. The biologist recommended that the project would have negligible short-term impacts on wildlife due to temporary noise and dust when fuels are cut and masticated. There would be no impacts on threatened and endangered wildlife or other BLM special status wildlife.

The BLM archaeologist conducted a cultural resource study of the project area. The study included background records search, field inventory, and Native American consultation. The study was designed to help BLM meet its obligations under Section 106 of the Historic Preservation Act. The BLM archaeologist did not find any cultural resources within the project area. No significant cultural resources would be affected by the proposed action. This includes places of Native American religious and cultural significance (refer to the Section 106-compliance study attached).

The proposed action could have negligible short-term impacts on recreational use. Walkers, joggers, bicyclists, and motorists might be inconvenienced temporarily during project implementation due to the noise and dust caused by cutting and masticating fuels. Recreationists would continue to use the project area after the project is implemented.

The project area is not known for its visual resources. The proposed project would have a negligible impact on visual resources. Some vegetation would be removed. The fuel break would not be visible, except by the air. It would not, for example, mar the scenic beauty of a river canyon. The proposed action is in line with BLM's VRM class III management objective which is to partially retain the existing character of the landscape.

4.2 Impacts of the No Action Alternative

There would be no impacts to environmental resources, such as water, soils, and wildlife. There could be impacts to firefighting efforts. If a wildfire occurred, firefighters would not have this strategic fuel break to stop the advance of the fire and attack the fire. The result could be a larger wildfire that impacts environmental resources well beyond the project area. There may also be impacts to private property.

4.3 Cumulative Impacts

The proposed action would not cause negative cumulative impacts to significant biological and cultural resources. The proposed action would not cause negative cumulative impacts to atmospheric, water, and soil resources.

The proposed action is expected to have beneficial cumulative impact on wildfire suppression in the area as long as BLM maintains the fuel break. If fire suppression becomes more effective as this fuel break contributes to a system of fuel breaks being constructed in the watershed, then the average size of wildfires would be reduced, and the average age of stands of vegetation would increase. If successful, a cumulative effect of fuel breaks would be to edge the ecosystem toward a slightly later successional stage. By limiting the growth of a wildfire, the cumulative effect of a system of fuel breaks can be to prevent a natural ecosystem process, (like fire stimulated germination of the seed of fire adapted species), from reaching portions of the landscape. Another cumulative effect of fuel breaks can be to provide for local stand-age diversity by maintaining burned and unburned plant communities in close proximity.

5.0 Agencies and Persons Consulted


No outside agencies were consulted.

5.1 Authors

James Barnes, BLM NEPA coordinator/Archaeologist

Brian Mulhollan, BLM Fuels specialist

5.2 BLM Interdisciplinary Team/Reviewers:


NEPA coordinator/Archaeologist
11/3/08
Date


Fuels specialist
11/4/08
Date


Recreation
10/31/08
Date


Botany
10/31/08
Date


Wildlife/fisheries
10/31/08
Date

5.3 Availability of Document and Comment Procedures

This EA would be posted on Folsom Field Office's website (www.blm.gov/ca/folsom) under NEPA and would be available for a 15-day public review period. The EA is also available by mail upon request during this 15-day public review period. Comments should be sent to James Barnes at Bureau of Land Management, Folsom Field Office, 63 Natoma Street, Folsom, CA 95630, or emailed to James_Barnes@ca.blm.gov.

**Bureau of Land Management
Bakersfield District
Folsom Resource Area**

Botanical Resource Inventory Report

Project name: Arastraville Fuel Break

Project description: Build and maintain a 200' wide fuelbreak for approximately one mile along an existing road. Vegetation with stems less than 6" diameter would be cut with a masticator, or cut with chainsaws by a hand crew. Remaining trees would be limbed to a height of 8', or to ½ the height of the tree, whichever is less. The fuelbreak would be maintained every 5 to 7 years, using the same two methods to cut brush. In addition, vehicle barriers will be constructed as needed to prevent vehicle traffic on the fuelbreak.

Size of disturbance: 24 acres

Project location: T. 2N, R. 16E, sections 21 and 28.

USGS Quads: Twain Harte and Tuolumne

County: Tuolumne

Geographic area: Sierra foothills

Elevation range: 3600'-3920'

Geology/soils: Soil vegetation mapping (Pacific Southwest Forest and Range Experiment Station) has Josephine (schist) and Sites soils

Land form: Ridgetop and saddle to side-slope and drainage bottom.

Plant community/vegetation: West-side ponderosa pine forest with sugar pine, Douglas fir, incense cedar, black oak, canyon live oak, big leaf maple, white leaf manzanita, miewukkka manzanita, Sierra plum, deer brush, buck brush, toyon, rose, golden fleece, mountain pink currant, mountain misery, poison oak.

CNDDDB records: For the two quads these species are reported: *Allium tribracteatum*, *Clarkia australis*, *Erythronium tuolumnense*, *Lomatium stebbinsii*, *Mimulus pulchellus*.

Inventory description (methodology, problems, reliability, coverage): The date of the inventory was late for early-flowering species like Tuolumne fawn lily, *Erythronium tuolumnense*. However appropriate habitat for the species did not appear to be present. The date of the survey was early in the season for *Clarkia australis*. Whether this species has potential to be in the project area is an open question. There is a single report from 1965 of the species in the vicinity of Twain Harte, near the current project. Although the source is quite reliable, the report must be viewed with some question. The location is a distinct outlier from the rest of the range of the species. And in 1965 it was not known that two species of *Clarkia*, *Clarkia australis* and *Clarkia virgata* could not be distinguished without genetic testing. If the Twain Harte plants were not *Clarkia australis*, then the project area is well outside the known range of *Clarkia australis*. Seedling *Clarkia* were not observed, but could have been missed.

Sensitive species particularly searched for: *Erythronium tuolumnense*. In a typical season only fragile dried plants of this species would have been observable at the date of the survey. Appropriate habitat for this species was not observed.

Sensitive species or other botanical resources at site: None found.

Weeds at site: Himalayan blackberry, Klamath weed.

Project impacts: None to special status species.

Recommendations: Standard spec's for cleaned equipment to prevent weed introductions.

Date of inventory: 5/6/08

Date of report: 10/21/08

Signature:



Title: Botanist

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25 JUL 1997

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Water Tank

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